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SPELLBOUND

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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“... they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound. . .” Mark 11:16 (NRSV)

— A young man is on his way to die, and the people around him are spellbound.

He has ridden into the city in a way that has caused the peasants to erupt in joyful, patriotic fervor. “Our King has come.” It also caused the political authorities to call a meeting to decide how to get rid of him.

And then, before any of them could catch their breath, he went to the Temple and did something that sealed his fate.

The trouble with Jesus is that he is sometimes larger than life. Over at Notre Dame University he is portrayed dramatically in a huge outside mural on the library with his arms raised in the gesture of blessing. You can see that mural best through the end zone of the football stadium where Notre Dame's legendary Fighting Irish have played for years. Two upraised arms are, football fans know, the referee's signal that the ball is in the end zone. And so he is known affectionately at Notre Dame as Touchdown Jesus.

In Michelangelo's Pieta he lies in lifeless beauty across his mother's lap, her son — dead.

In Roualt's Christ Mocked, which hangs on my office wall, he sits between two persecutors at his trial, humiliated by real authority in this world, except that his persecutors, flanking him on either side, don't look very threatening. He, nearly naked, eyes closed, is perfect peace. He is already reigning.

The other picture I treasure is actually a poster reproduction of a wood carving done by an African American folk artist in Columbus, Ohio, Elijah Pierce. Jesus and Peter are together after the resurrection. Peter has just said, “You know, I love you.” Jesus is saying, “Feed my sheep.” His eyes are piercing. Both of them are black.

— He has been a superstar on Broadway; he has been painted and sculpted as a victorious warrior, mighty king, humble monastic, political revolutionary, and in the body of a woman, Christa on the cross. His face has been on the cover of national magazines, and articles about him have appeared even in the *New York Times*.

He continues to intrigue and fascinate, not only believers, but non-believers. Some of the best scholarship about him has been done by Jewish scholars. His teachings are respected and admired by theologians from other traditions. In his name and for his sake millions have died and yet he remains a bridge, a link, in many ways. In spite of sectarian violence that uses his name, he is the hope of the world.

And yet it is difficult to locate him in history in the same way historians help us locate Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great. The reason is that during his life no one of much importance paid attention to him. So no one took notes or drew a picture of him. He, himself, wrote nothing that we know of other than a few marks he scratched in the dirt one day. The historians of his time, with a few minor exceptions, ignore him. And when he died, it was in such a hurried, obscure manner that, again, no one much noticed.

The written materials began to emerge decades after his life and they do not pretend to be biographies. They are gospels, announcements of Good News. They tell a little of what he said and did and how people responded to him. There are four of them and each tells the story slightly differently. And so it is difficult to locate him in history with much precision.

Mark, writing several decades after his life, remembers that when he was thirty years old Jesus, the carpenter's son, came from Nazareth into Galilee and began to speak with the poor people. He told them that the Kingdom of God was present, not in some other place or time, but there, in their midst. He invited people to live as if they were citizens of that Kingdom and then he described it in terms they had never heard before.

They lived — those Galilean peasants did — in a world governed by rigid notions of who was in and who was out. “Structures of inclusion and exclusion” the sociologists call them and every society has them. . . some way to know who is in and who is not, who is righteous and who is a sinner, clean — unclean, accepted — outcast. But this man said there are no rigid barriers of exclusion like that in God’s Kingdom.

Rather, in God’s Kingdom, everyone is welcome. It doesn’t matter what race you are, what gender, what nationality. It doesn’t matter how much money you have or whether or not you’ve been to college. There is a place at the table for everyone. That got their attention. And when they began to follow him around they saw him act as if it were true, as if, for instance, a man with leprosy was not really untouchable, as if a social outcast really deserved a place at the table, as if women were actually full human beings with as much worth and dignity as men, as if children were so very precious one ought not to banish them or merely tolerate them, but ought to stop what one was doing, even if it was talking serious adult theology, and welcome them and hold them and bless them.

The people paid attention and so did the authorities in Jerusalem. They became nervous when the crowds of Galileans following him around the countryside grew larger. They wanted no disturbances; they wanted no reason for the Romans to become more oppressive.

And then, all four writers agree, he comes to Jerusalem on the Passover. He rides a donkey and both the crowds of Galilean peasants on the road and the nervous authorities see immediately an enactment of an ancient prophesy:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorius is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
[Zechariah 9:9]

The ancient promise was that the Savior would come like that, the promised one. In a time of military and political occupation, it very much looked like an act of sedition.

And then, Mark remembers, the very next day, he went to the Temple and overturned the tables of the money changers, and drove them out. The people were spellbound.

The money changers, by the way, weren’t doing anything wrong. Passover Pilgrims came to Jerusalem to make a sacrifice at the Temple. They bought the sacrificial animals there, in one of the outer Temple courts. Only Jewish money was allowed to be used within the Temple and so there was a small currency exchange.

Professor John Dominic Crossan, in his book *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*, says that it wasn’t really a cleansing of the Temple, rather it was a symbolic destruction of the Temple — and it is what got him crucified.

Now there is a word that needs to be said every time a sermon is preached on this text: in fact every time modern Christians think about the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities which is such a critical part of the story which Mark tells. The incident in the Temple has been used as a rationale for anti-Semitism.

“Christ killers,” anti-Semites from the middle ages to the people who spray-painted the logo of the Ku Klux Klan on two homes in one of the suburbs last Monday night, have called Jewish people. Part of the tragic reality of anti-Semitism is that Christianity and the Christian Church have sometimes given it moral respectability. “After all, look what they did to our Jesus” and “look at what he thought about their religion.” That is wrong and it has been associated with historic evil on the grandest scale. The role official Judaism played in his crucifixion has been and is still debated and argued by scholars and church officials. The Vatican recently changed its historic position and said clearly that it was the Romans who did it. And it was. Pontius Pilate was a Roman official. Roman soldiers did it. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment.

The conflict in the New Testament, Professor Crossan urges his readers to understand, is not between Christianity and Judaism, that's a sham, but in Jesus' day between the Judaism of Galilee and the Judaism of official Jerusalem which was deeply compromised by its accommodation to the political powers. The High Priests had made a kind of mildly corrupt arrangement with the Romans. The conflict, in terms which we can understand, says Professor Crossan, is between religion that includes all God's children and religion based on a principle of rigid exclusiveness. The modern conflict is between the Jesus Christ of the New Testament and whatever in life that denies the dignity of human beings, that excludes, discriminates, keeps outside the mainstream — children of God: an educational system which, simply as a matter of basic structure, says that if you're born into a wealthy family you'll receive every conceivable educational advantage. If your parents are poor, don't own property, live in a city where a lot of people are poor and don't own property, you are educationally out of luck and therefore in a lot of trouble for the rest of your life. Or a health care system which on the one hand produces the best medical care in the world, able to deal routinely with medical challenges unheard of a few years ago, and yet can't figure out how to inoculate all the children against measles and polio and chicken pox and can't get basic prenatal care and poor pregnant women together. Or religion that leaps to moral judgments on the basis of a sexual orientation which we are just beginning to understand, and then excludes.

What Jesus did in the Temple was a final gesture of impatience and anger at the way human societies exclude the least fortunate and find ways to make everything work for the fortunate. It was, says Crossan, a gesture perfectly consistent with what he had been saying and doing in Galilee — welcoming sinners, eating with outcasts, touching the untouchable, affirming women, blessing children. It was revolutionary. Seditious. So they crucified him. And the people were spellbound, as I am when I rehearse the story and as I think about this day.

Each of us keeps in our hearts an image of him. Because he looms so large over history, it is impossible not to. Even people who don't much care have a mental image which becomes, in a way, the reality of Jesus Christ for them. For some that image is shaped by art, by Sunday School pictures of Jesus seen long ago, or great art; and for some the image of Jesus is shaped by how people talk about him: The man on the corner talking into his little microphone for six straight hours, droning, badgering anyone who will listen, or the televangelist pleading with viewers to make a decision for him or else spend eternity in hell. Or the zealous ideologue who knows what Jesus' position would be on every current political issue, and if you don't happen to understand him in that way you're not welcome. And, of course, for millions, there is more than one image. Jesus teaching the crowd on the mountain, standing in the boat, Jesus blessing the children, talking with the woman at the well, Jesus raising the little girl, healing the epileptic son, giving sight to the blind. And in your gallery of images, may I propose that you include one from this day. Jesus in humble dignity riding into the city, and Jesus in fierce anger, driving the money changers from the Temple.

The people who saw it were spellbound . . . by a man strong enough to challenge prevailing values and think in new ways about what is good, and righteous and clean;

- spellbound by a man unwilling to accept the tradition, but always asking about God's will and God's way;
- spellbound by a man so thoroughly at one with himself, so confident in his own ability and responsibility that he is willing to make others, important others, uncomfortable;
- spellbound by a man who so totally believes what he said about finding life by losing it, that he is about to do it, walk unflinchingly into the jaws of death to live out the strong love of God which seems now to be the totality, the essence of him.

That still takes our breath away. The Gospel is still as counter-culture and subversive to prevailing cultural values as it ever was. He apparently never attended a program to learn how to take care of his own needs, someone quipped. One commentator — writing about the earlier incident when the crowds were pressing in on him, clamoring for his attention and his disciples were begging him to go with them to a quiet spot so they could get a bite to eat, and Jesus instead receives the crowd and teaches and talks into the evening — said that Jesus apparently didn't learn how not to be co-dependent on the needs of others for his own sense of values, hadn't learned how to say no to others and yes to himself. Unless, of course, saying yes to others was how he meant to say yes to himself. Unless he really meant that you find life by giving life away. That's still revolutionary.

There was a cover article last week in the *New York Times Magazine* about the executives of the Philip Morris Company and the new marketing success the entire cigarette industry is experiencing. Faith Popcorn, a specialist in identifying popular business trends talks about "pleasure revenge" as a new market reality in our culture, which means, I take it, "I am entitled to my share of pleasure, my share of self-indulgence and I'm going to get mine even if it kills me and maybe you too." It's what Joe and Josephine Camel are all about.

And so it is revolutionary, is it not, to see him today — starting to give his own life away; living out in terrible but beautiful reality his haunting maxim — "whoever loses life for my sake finds it."

Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, in a scholarly article, writes:

If Jesus is to be anything more than another name, another historical mythic figure for us; if he is to become in sense "Christ," "Savior," "Lord"; if his name and story are to arouse in us anything like "faith," then we shall have to encounter him, and not merely ideas about him. Before there was Christology there was Jesus. Faith needs not only to hear about but, in some real sense, to see Jesus.

[*The Living Pulpit*, "We Would See Jesus," January-March, 1994]

This strong, brave, impatient young man is the Jesus we see today. He's about to die, about to give himself into God's hands, about to lay it all down, not knowing the outcome, but trusting that somehow God's amazing grace, God's unconditional love will continue to be with him. I am spellbound by that integrity and authenticity and strength.

And I am drawn to and moved by that model of how to live and how to die.

There come days when we can no longer control outcomes. There come occasions when the unexpected happens, when the test comes back positive, when the relationship ends, when the job is abolished, when hopes and precious dreams vanish. I sat at lunch with an old friend in Louisville this week. "How's your family?" I asked, and he looked me in the eye and said, "Not good." And explained how his eighteen-year-old son, a college freshman, started to have seizures about a year ago — at first occasionally, and then more frequently, now several times a day: how the young man is bravely trying to finish his first year at college and how all of them are waiting for major brain surgery this June. "I can't help him. All my life I've been able to provide, to fix things, to make things okay for my family, and I can't do a damn thing." And I, a father, a pastor, too, tried to find a word to say, but we both knew that sooner or later something like that happens. And then it is very good news to remember the story of a young man who lived in absolute confidence of God's providence and power and love: could live out his life so authentically that suffering and dying seemed no longer to have power over him, seemed to know that no matter what happened in the days ahead — abandonment by his friends, belittlement, public humiliation, excruciatingly painful death — nothing was going to separate him from God; that after exile comes reunion, after destruction — rebuilding, after death — resurrection.

"Do you love my Jesus?" the old spiritual asks.

Love him — trust him — follow him. This one who comes into the city on the back of a donkey.

Watch him now, spellbound, as he goes to his cross. . .